DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 327 823 CS 010 380

AUTHOR Miller, Janet A.
TITLE Theoretical Orientation of British Infant School Teachers.
PUB DATE Nov 90
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College Reading Association (34th, Nashville, TN, November 2-4, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *British Infant Schools; Foreign Countries; Primary Education; *Reading Instruction; Reading Research; Reading Skills; *Reading Teachers; *Whole Language Approach
IDENTIFIERS Emergent Literacy; *England; Theoretical Orientation to Reading Profile

ABSTRACT

A study examined the theoretical orientation of infant school and infant department teachers in England. The Theoretical Orientation to Reading Profile (TORP) was used to determine the teacher's orientation to reading instruction. TORP applies a Likert scale response system to a series of statements about how reading should be taught. Subjects included 146 teachers and head teachers from over 40 different schools. Three teachers scored within the lower range indicating a phonics orientation. One hundred nineteen scored within the middle range of the scale which indicated a skills orientation. Twenty-four responded within the high range of the scale indicating a more whole language orientation. These results indicated that the majority of the teachers who participated in the study appeared to hold a skills orientation to reading instruction, rather than a whole language orientation. Nevertheless, many teachers indicated preferences for several of the practices associated with whole language. Their "middle of the road" orientation, in addition to the traditional autonomy of individual schools and teachers in determining instructional methods and materials in England, apparently results in the use of a wide variety of approaches to beginning reading, including reading schemes, trade books, thematic units and an integrated day which incorporates a number of language-related activities which support emergent literacy. (One figure is included; 11 references are attached.) (MG)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Janet A. Miller

THEORETICAL ORIENTATION OF BRITISH INFANT SCHOOL TEACHERS

ED327823

During the last several decades advocates of whole language approaches to reading in the United States have frequently looked to schools in England as models of language and literature based instruction. While support for whole language instruction has been provided in the states by the research, theory and practice of a number of Americans (for example, Goodman, 1986; Newman, 1985; Harste, Woodward and Burke, 1984;) educators in the U.S. have also read about or observed English teachers who have, for a number of years, used real books and engaged pupils in a variety of oral and written language related activities as a means of promoting literacy. And they found inspiration as well as theoretical support from British publications such as Read With Me by Liz Waterland, Learning to Read, by Margaret Meek, and The Meaning Makers, by Gordon Wells.

During the 1980s, I engaged in a series a visits to a number of schools in England, particularly in the London area, where teachers used trade books rather than reading schemes as basic materials for teaching reading. In addition they encouraged shared reading and engaged children in a wide variety of language related activities such as writing, book discussions, choral reading and drama. Teachers in these schools, especially those in the infant schools and departments, appeared to be strongly committed

CS010380

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Janet A. Miller

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

to a whole language approach to literacy learning and to have found successful ways of integrating written and oral language instruction in a topics approach to instruction.

Support for a language-based approach to beginning reading has been provided for a number of years in England by reports of the Department of Education and Science and Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools. A Language for Life, known as the Bullock Report (1985) affirmed the importance of language and the "organic relationship between the various aspects of English," (p. xxxv). It stressed the importance of natural development of language related abilities and appropriate intervention in promoting literacy. Reports on surveys of the schools, such as Education 5 to 9: an illustrative survey of 80 first schools in England (DES, 1982) and The Teaching and Learning of Language and Literacy (DES, 1990) noted the importance of reading in the curriculum and encouraged practices which utilized a variety of materials. including fiction and non-fiction books. And in The Curriculum From 5 to 16, (DES, 1989) the Department of Education and Science recommended that pupils' command of language in listening, speaking, reading and writing, would be enhanced by the use of language for a variety of purposes in home and school as well as through specific study of both language and literature.

As a result of this strong endorsement of language and literature as the heart of literacy programs, and my

personal observations in the schools, I came to believe that English teachers might hold a set of underlying beliefs about reading and reading instruction which enabled them readily to embrace many whole language practices. While schools across England reflect a wide variety of practices in reading instruction, infant school and infant department teachers, in particular, seemed to base their reading instruction on a theoretical orientation which is currently characterized as whole language or "top-down" as they emphasized quality literature, and utilized student writing and shared reading experiences. In order to test that hypothesis, I decided to carry out a study to examine the theoretical orientation of infant school and infant department teachers in England.

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

For this investigation, I used the Theoretical Orientation to Reading Profile (DeFord, 1985). This instrument was designed to determine a teacher's orientation to reading instruction. Theoretical orientation is defined as a network of assumptions through which experiences are organized and acted upon. According to DeFord, there are three major orientations operating in reading instruction. The first, labelled a phonics orientation, emphasizes "smaller than word level language units, with gradual movement toward word units and attention to comprehension." (DeFord, p. 353) The second, called a skills orientation, emphasizes building an "adequate sight word vocabulary for

the children to use in reading." These sight words are usually "introduced in context, with multiple opportunities provided for practice." Word attack skills are usually introduced in a "hierarchically arranged sequence" and text is generated for further practice of the sight vocabulary. (DeFord, p. 353) A third orientation, categorized as whole language, stresses meaning, provides readers with "quality literature from the outset of instruction" and emphasizes the "developing sense of story/text as a framework for dealing with smaller units of language." Activities focusing on words or letters are "integrated into the reading experience." (DeFord, p. 354)

The Theoretical Orientation to Reading Instruction (TORP) uses a Likert scale response system to a series of statements about how reading should be taught. Teachers with a phonics orientation generally agree with statements in the instrument which emphasize verbalization of the rules of phonics, exactness in word identification, and moderate attention to sight words. Teachers with a skills orientation to reading instruction tend to agree with statements expressing concern about the introduction of words before instruction and the importance of helping children learn multiple strategies or skills for identifying words. Skills oriented teachers feel less concern with phonic analysis as the most important word identification strategy. Teachers with a whole language orientation, also feel feel less concern with phonic analysis, but they tend

to agree with statements which do not support isolated skills instruction and agree with statements in the instrument which emphasize the importance of meaning and natural language with less stress on exactness in reading. (DeFord, pp. 354-355)

Using the TORP instrument, I surveyed infant school and infant department teachers and head teachers from sixty-three schools. The schools were randonly selected from among two hundred and thirty-six supported or assisted schools in two counties in northeastern England. After personally contacting the head teachers of each school or department to explain the project and establish the number of infant school level teachers at each school, I mailed explanatory letters and the survey instrument, along with a stamped, return envelope, to each school. Three hundred forty-eight copies of the survey were mailed to the selected schools. In addition to the statements which made up the TORP instrument, I asked the teachers and head teachers to identify their assigned teaching levels and respond to several additional questions about their teaching practices and preferences.

Upon recept of completed surveys, I scored them according to the directions to get total scores for each respondent. This enabled me to determine the number of teachers and head teachers who fell within the various ranges which indicate either a phonics, skills or whole

language orientation. In addition, I tallied the additional questions on levels and practices.

RESULTS

One hundred forty-six teachers and head teachers from over forty different schools responded to the TORP instrument, resulting in a return rate of forty-two percent. The majority of the respondants failed to identify their level of teaching within the infant schools and departments. (This may have been due to confusion caused by the way the question was worded.) However, among those who identified their current level or assignment, twenty-six worked at the Reception level (ages four and five), twenty-two at Middle Infant (ages five and six) and eighteen at Top Infant level (ages six and seven). Three indicated they were head teachers. Infant schools and departments ranged in size from two to eleven teachers.

Total scores on the TORP ranged from fifty-nine to one hundred thirty-two. See Figure 1 for distribution of the

(Insert Figure 1 here)

scores. A score within the low range (from 0 to 65) indicates a phonics orientation, a middle range score (from 65 to 110) indicates a skills orientation and a score within the high range (110 to 140) indicates a whole language orientation. Three (2 percent) of the teachers and heads responding scored within the lower range of the scale which indicates a phonics orientation. One hundred nineteen (82 percent) scored within the middle range of the scale which

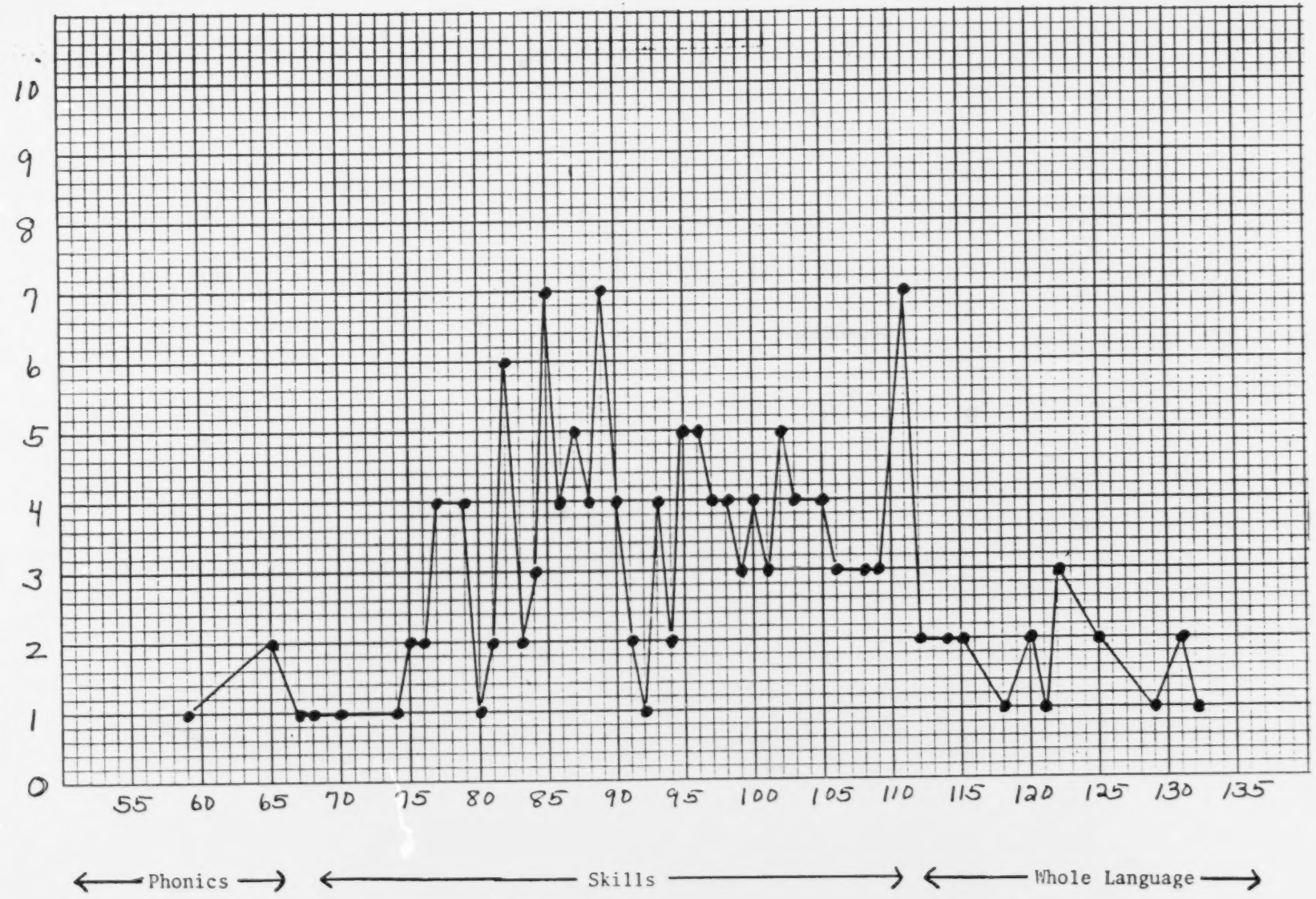

Figure 1. Distribution of Total Scores on the TORP

indicates a skills orientation. Twenty-four (16 percent) of the teachers and heads responding scored within the high range of the scale which indicates a more whole language orientation.

In addition to the TORP items, teachers responded to the five additional questions about their own teaching practices and preferences. Forty-nine per cent indicated they would not rather use reading schemes (basal readers) than real books. Seventy-seven per cent indicated they preferred to let children use invented spellings rather than insist on correct spelling during writing activities. Eighty-one per cent said they would rather have children guess at unrecognized words than have them ask for help. Seventy-eight claimed they set aside time during the day for children to do uninterrupted silent reading. And ninety-seven indcated that they supported the use of Big Books with infant school children.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

While England is recognized as one of the countries where many teachers utilize approaches generally associated with whole language, the randomly selected infant school and department teachers who participated in this study did not overwhelmingly indicate a theoretical orientation reflecting the whole language approach. Instead, the majority of the teachers who participated in this study by responding to the TORP instrument appear to hold a skills orientation to reading instruction. Nevertheless many teachers indicated

preferences for several of the practices associated with whole language. Their "middle of the road" orientation, in addition to the traditional autonomy of individual schools and teachers in determining instructional methods and materials in England, apparently results in the use of a wide variety of approaches to beginning reading, including reading schemes, trade books, thematic units and an integrated day which incorporates a number of language related activities which support emergent literacy.

On the other hand, teachers with a skills orientation may experience some difficulty as they attempt to adjust to the new National Curriculum for England and Wales which strongly reflects a whole language point of view. The English attainment targets of the Natural Curriculum mandate meaningful and natural development of all aspects of language development and use, and programes of study stress the goals of independent reading, the importance of meaning, the uses of literature, the role of the home in encouraging emergent literacy, and reading as transaction. Further, the National Curriculum English Working Group notes that "Teachers should recognise that reading is a complex but unitary process and not a set of discrete skills which can be taught separately in turn and, ultimately, bolted together." (DES, 1989, 16.9) Teachers with a whole language theoretical orientation would tend to be in greater agreement with the attainment targets and programs of study set forth by the Working Group and the National Curriculum

for English and should, more easily, be able to effectively carry out the mandates of the Education Reform Act of 1988.

REFERENCES

DeFord, Diane E. "Validating the construct of theoretical orientation in reading instruction. Reading Research Quarterly, 20, 351-367.

A Language for Life. (1975). Report of the Committee of Inquiry appointed by the Secretary of State for Education and Science under the Chairmanship of Sir Alan Bullock FBA. London: H.M.S.O.

Department of Education and Science. (1989). The Curriculum from 5 to 16. London: H.M.S.O.

Department of Education and Science. (1982). Education 5 to 9: an illustrative survey of 80 first schools in England. London: H.M.S.O.

Department of Education and Science. (1990). The Teaching and Learning of Language and Literacy. London: H.M.S.O.

Goodman, K.S. (1986) What's whole in whole language. Ontario, Canada: Scholastic-Tab.

Harste, J., Woodward, V., Burke, C. (1984). Language stories and literacy lessons. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann Education Books, Inc.

Meek, Margaret. (1982). Learning to read. London: The Bodley Head.

Newman, J.M., ed. (1985). Whole language theory in use. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann Education Books, Inc.

Waterland, Liz. (1985). Read With me: An apprenticeship approach to reading. Gloucester: Thimble Press.

Wells, G. (1986). The Meaning Makers. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann Education Books, Inc.